



A healthy body. A happy mind.

A parent's guide to student wellbeing



Introduction

When your child first leaves home, there are a lot of challenges to face. From living independently for the first time, to having to do day-to-day tasks like grocery shopping, going to the GP, cooking nutritious food, not shrinking their clothes and attempting to balance the amount of work and play in their new life.

If you're dealing with your child leaving home to go to university for the first time, the most important thing to achieve is open, clear, effective communication.

Our contributors

We've teamed up with leading student wellbeing experts from Sheffield Hallam University to create this guide.



Hanna Leahy

Wellbeing Business
Development Manager



John Wagstaff

Gym Manager



Rob Wilson

Principal Lecturer on
Financial Sustainability

Managing expectations

Managing expectations before your child leaves home allows everyone involved to know how, when and why they should be keeping in touch. And by collaboratively drawing up a plan for that, you won't need to feel like you're nagging and your child will know what's expected of them.

The good news is, that despite all of the new challenges students face, there's plenty you can do to help support them in this transition – out of sight doesn't have to mean out of mind.





Illness

Moving away from home is a stressful experience for a number of reasons, and stress itself compromises immunity.

However, in Freshers' Week, students quite often have more 'important' things on their minds than making sure they have a local doctor. Students tend to have a very reactive process when it comes to registering with their GP – many don't register until they're already ill.

This can lead to a delay in accessing the correct services, so it's good to encourage students to register as soon as they move, rather than waiting until they feel unwell.

Being ill away from home is stressful in itself, and it's not uncommon for students to travel home to see their family GP. This isn't good for their health or for the development of their new-found independence.

Tips for parents:

- Help your child to find their new local GP before they move
- Once they've moved, ask how they're settling in and bring the conversation around to asking if they've remembered to register



Homesickness

Loneliness is something that can affect all students, even those who have chosen to stay at home throughout their studies. Whether your child has moved far away or is still under your roof, they'll be facing their own social challenges.

If your child is moving away, they'll have to deal with living independently without having you there to support them. Starting afresh in a new city is always different, especially if they've spent the last 18 years becoming familiar with their home town and the help available there.

Students who stay at home face their own challenges too. For example, if they're not living with their fellow students they may have difficulty integrating and begin to feel lonely despite being at home.

Tips for parents:

- Chat about things your child enjoys doing and ask if there are any teams or societies for that at their new university
- Let them know you're still there when they need you
- Ask about their new life and be excited about it
- Arrange a weekly call to check-in without being overbearing

Diet

Eating well and taking a sensible approach to alcohol are key to your child's general health and wellbeing. Late nights out socialising and rushing around to lectures can mean that students miss important meals, miss out on the necessary nutrition and get run down. There's even a name for it – freshers' flu. Ultimately, getting run down can lead to longer periods of illness, missed lectures and underperformance.

Tips for parents:

- Get them in to good eating habits by buying their first food shop
- Teach them a few easy recipes before they head to university
- Buy them a few simple cookbooks
- Cook up a few freezable meals and put them in their freezer – healthy ready meals!
- Pass on discount codes and coupons so your child can eat well for less
- Suggest they get a supermarket loyalty card



Fitness

When students leave home to go to university, their fitness levels often take a knock as they relish having the freedom to eat what they want, when they want and decide if exercise is something they want to take or leave.

Within the education system, exercise usually means sport; and if your child isn't particularly competitive this can be quite a daunting and intimidating thought – but it doesn't have to be.

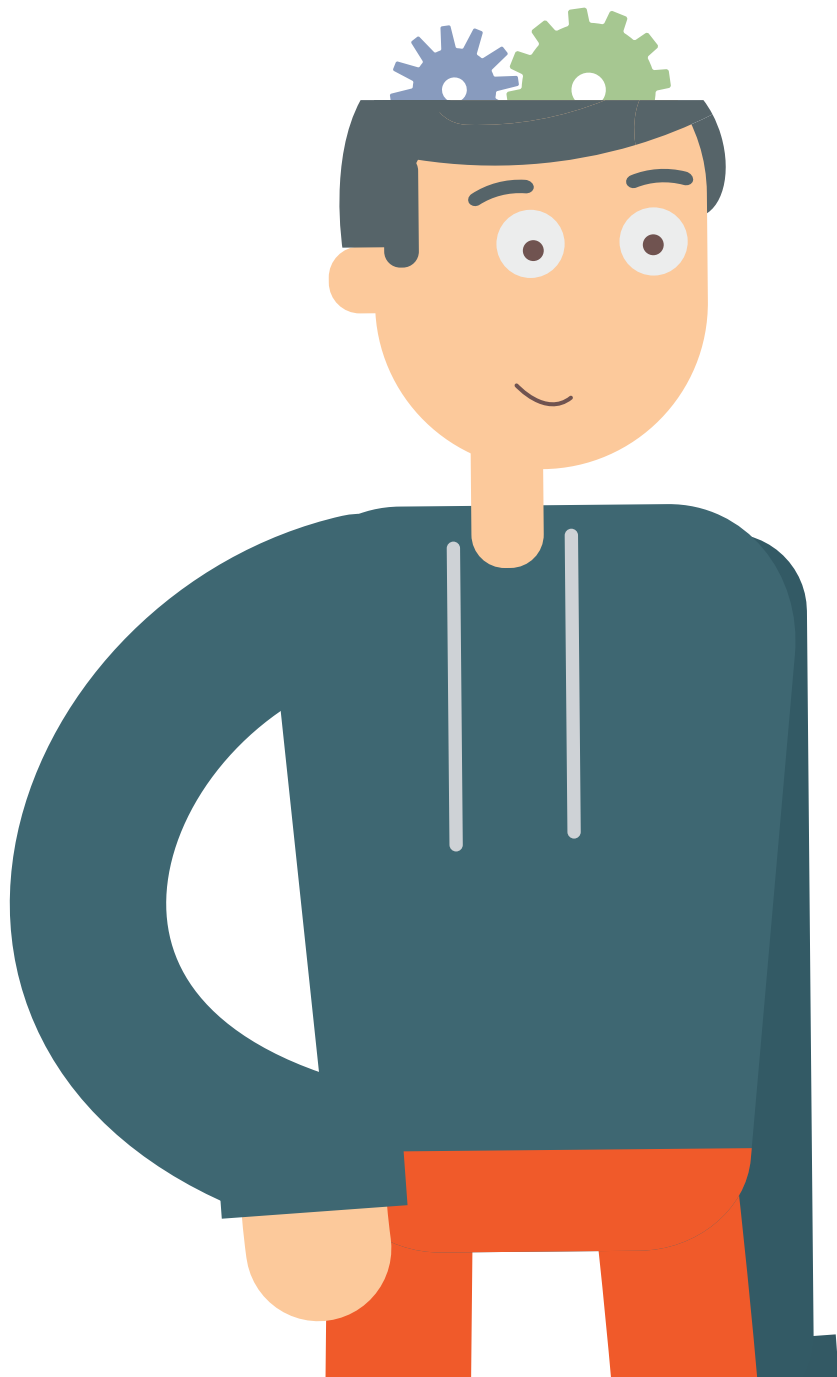
Staying fit and healthy is about managing vices – encouraging your child to think about their meals in advance and how they can fit being active into their new life is a great way to form new habits and routines that stick throughout their time at university. Just 30 minutes of exercise three times a week can make a huge difference, whether that's playing a sport, going for walk, running or hitting the gym between lectures.

You can support your child in forming healthy habits by helping them research their new environment. Working out where their nearest gym, swimming pool, leisure centres, running routes and places to eat are before they move will ensure they have all the information they need to make healthy choices. However, it's worth remembering that once you've helped them gain the knowledge, whether they choose to action it is ultimately up to them.

Tips for parents:

- Help your child research facilities before they move
- Suggest going for a walk together to get to know the local area and good running/walking routes





Mental health

Making the transition to university life can be a stressful and emotional experience for many children. In fact, in recent years the number of students reporting mental health problems has been on the rise.

There are many reasons for this, three of the biggest being: increased student tuition fees, feelings of loneliness and isolation linked to student debt, and the new workloads and stresses of independent living.

This increase in mental health problems has coincided with a significant reduction in funding for child and adolescent mental health services and a squeeze in funding for university counselling services. However, there are a few things that parents can do to help...

Tips for parents:

- Stay in touch regularly and be supportive
- Keep an eye out for changes in behaviour and personality
- Respect their space, but help them manage the stresses of daily life
- Acknowledge their problems and empathise
- Make sure they know that getting support is not a sign of weakness
- Provide them with info on counselling and support services



Finances

Students are given a lot of information in the first few weeks of university, and often finance finds its way to the bottom of the pile when it comes to absorbing and acting upon advice.

Being responsible for managing their own finances for the first time is a huge challenge that can seem pretty intimidating to a lot of new students. Despite the initial excitement of having a large sum of money deposited in their bank account at the start of the year, having that amount of cash all of a sudden can be scary when you don't know how to manage it.

Students often have a short-sighted view when it comes to finances. They live in the here and now, and they want to have fun and live life to the full. This means it's not uncommon for them to spend heavily at the start of the year with little thought about how this will affect them later on.

Budgeting

The main challenge you'll probably face when it comes to helping your child manage their finances independently for the first time, is teaching them how to budget and take financial responsibility.

Making a list of all their monthly outgoings and putting them in your own calendar as well as theirs will ensure you both have clear visibility of what needs to be paid and when.

To begin with try helping them out by sending a gentle reminder when payments are due, this can help to ease them into this new and often daunting responsibility and also gives them the chance to speak up if they're concerned about anything.

It's important to remember that this isn't about trying to run their life for them, it's about easing them into that financial responsibility.

The more planning you can help them do, the less stressful it'll be for everyone involved, allowing your child to focus on their studies instead of worrying about money.





Financial difficulties

If your child does find themselves in financial difficulty, it can be tempting to bail them out. This may be fine in some circumstances, but making a habit of it can also prevent them from growing into responsible, independent people, putting them at a distinct disadvantage when they enter the world of work after graduation.

Communicating with your child is just as important in finance as it is in other areas of wellbeing; finding the balance that ensures they're looked after but also taking responsibility.

Don't quiz them on how much they're spending or what they're spending it on, just have open communication so they feel they can raise issues if they have them.

Tips for parents:

- List all incomings and outgoings
- Save payment dates in your calendar so you can send gentle reminders if needed
- Be supportive but distance yourself enough for them to take responsibility for their own finances
- Don't quiz your child on their spending

Time to talk about you

Has it been a while since you had some time to yourself to do the things you want to do? Your child going to university doesn't just mark a new stage of their life, it's also a new beginning for you.

It's time to start thinking about yourself more – what's been the barrier to doing what you want to do? More than likely a lack of time. For the last 18 years or more you've given your time and energy to focus on your child, their wants, their needs, but now is the perfect time to assess your options and work out how you'd like to spend your time.

Try to make changes to improve your own health and wellbeing, think about nutrition, exercise, and socialising. Set yourself a clear plan and stick to it by being realistic in what you hope to achieve. Forming good habits takes time, and the more consideration you give your new habits, the more likely they are to stick and change your life for the better.





Communication is key

Communication and honesty are absolutely key for maintaining a good relationship and taking care of your child. So, your child can enjoy living independently, and you can enjoy knowing they're ok without having to nag.

The key to making this work is not telling your child what to do. None of us, no matter how old we are, like that. This is especially true for students - they're on the brink of starting a new, independent life, so treat them as responsible adults. If you have any concerns, tell them and ask how they'd like to manage the situation, so everything is clear and open.

For example, you might establish that once a week you have a phone call just to keep in touch – then no one is left worrying or wondering.

Quite often, parents want to suggest and control what the students are up to, and of course this comes from the right place – and they might well know better having had similar experiences themselves. But that tends to have a detrimental effect on parent-child relationships.

There's a balance to be made between being supportive but also respecting your child's new independence. By putting the ball in their court, you demonstrate that you now see them as an adult with particular responsibilities. They're likely to respond a lot better to that approach.



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